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ABSTRACT

To shape reform in rural education, it is necessary to understand the problems, as well as the strengths of rural social and educational communities. An analysis of demographic, economic, and educational trends shows that in rural areas in general, working populations are shrinking, economies are declining, and students are not competing well in college attendance and completion. For more than 85% of rural students nationwide, a college education culminating in a professional career remains out of reach. When rural economies were self-sufficient, perhaps educational opportunity did not matter as much, but today that is not the case. Over 100 students at Western Carolina University (North Carolina) were surveyed to investigate their experiences with rural life. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, indicating a sense of home, family, community, and smallness of scale that represent the best qualities of rural life. It is curious that rural communities, which for so long have been marginalized by the dominant culture, have precisely the qualities for which the critics of American schools are now looking. For rural schools to be successful in combatting their problems, they will have to capitalize on the community and family ties that rural students rated as so important. Contains 23 references. (TD)

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Home, Family, and Community: Ingredients in the Rural Education Equation

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Phil left his home in Murphy when he was 16 and went to college in Chapel Hill where he was taunted for being a 'hillbilly.' After graduation, he went to work as a chemist in Atlanta, but recently moved back to the mountains, a place where he feels at home. Now, at the age of 30, he is back in school to get a teaching degree. There aren't any jobs for chemists in Murphy.

Jonathan Kozol spoke to an audience of education students at our rural university while *Savage Inequalities* was being passionately debated around the country (Kozol, 1991). He was exciting and inspiring, and appealed to the ideals of our students. One graduate student, referring to the rural schools of her experience both as a student and teacher said with some relief, "I'm glad our schools aren't that bad. We don't have any of those problems." Her comment was indicative of a commonly held belief that rural schools are in good condition, especially in contrast to urban areas where racism, violence, financial problems and general decay are prevalent images. But is she correct? Are rural schools really in good condition?

Like their urban counterparts, schools in rural areas face financial inequalities, but they also have problems that are uniquely rural. A comprehensive report (Stern, 1994) found high rates of poverty and low levels of educational attainment. It found that rural schools were staffed by a younger, less well-educated faculty and administration who earn lower salaries and benefits than their metropolitan counterparts. Persistent problems related to rural school finance, teacher compensation and quality, facilities, curriculum and student achievement have been documented (Stern, 1994). Rural communities are said to be suffering

from a 'bitter harvest' with the well educated emigrating to metropolitan areas for better jobs (Stern, 1994; Harp, 1994). Rural schools have image problems that stem from long-standing negative attitudes toward 'country people.'

These problems stand in stark contrast to our student's naive reaction to Kozol. However, she was correct in some respects. Rural schools and communities have strengths that should be part of the prescription addressing problems and creating a foundation for directing changes in rural education. In order to develop an image of the shape of reform in rural education, it is necessary to understand the problems, as well as the strengths of rural social and educational communities.

The Problems

Rural Images

What Is Rural?

One problem facing rural education lies in the lack of a definitive understanding of the meaning of 'rural' (Haas, 1991; Stern, 1994). "Rural" is often defined from an outsider, urban perspective in much the same way that the dominant culture has traditionally spoken for minority groups. The U.S. government term for rural area is *nonmetropolitan*. What does *non*metropolitan mean? An area without skyscrapers and interstate junctions? The Census Bureau defines rural areas as communities with *less than* 2,500 inhabitants or *less than* 1000 inhabitants per square mile. Imagine New York City or Chicago being defined as *nonrural* areas with *more than 2,500 people* or as *areas without barns*. This urban perspective seems to relate to a weak identity among our students; they often appear apologetic for being from the country.

Attitudes toward Ruralness

Another basic problem that students of rural education must face is the preponderance of negative attitudes toward rural people and places. As Haas (1991) argues, modern American society does not value ruralness; prejudices against rural people and places are strong. Our students seem to have internalized those prejudices, and they exhibit an inferiority complex about their origins. Although the term rural conjures rich images, many of those images are based on negative stereotypes. Consider one rural image with roots in antiquity -- this is the country 'bumpkin' -- the healthy, naive, slow-witted, unsophisticated, ignorant, ultra-conservative, penniless soul from beyond the outer fringes of the interstate. The Oxford English Dictionary provides references from the 16th and 17th centuries for the unflattering characterization of a rural person as a bumpkin. While the side of the interstate on which one lived was not a defining feature of rural Western Europe at that time, rural persons were an easy target for the 16th century equivalent of present day prejudices and slurs. Just as one can imagine the bumpkin persona arising from demographic, economic and educational conditions in rural areas, the same relative conditions exist today to sustain the image. Even though our times are characterized by a heightened awareness of multicultural differences, it is still considered socially and politically correct to poke fun at 'rednecks,' 'hillbillies,' and 'hicks.'

A key to success in educational reform is the school staff, and yet, university education programs have done little to provide educators with specialized rural training (Stern, 1995). Rural education for rural educators must go beyond superficial sensitivity training to an examination of the ways in which prejudices are developed against rural

people and places. For example, elementary school social studies texts frequently portray rural areas in unflattering terms; children are taught that urban means, as a third grade child recalled, 'skyscrapers and people prancing around in fur coats' while rural means 'barns and girls with pigtails.' One North Carolina social studies text labeled the rural, mountainous western part of the state as an "unproductive region." Click on your thesaurus when your cursor is on the word rural and see what you find. Our computers listed *provincial, uncultured, unrefined, hinterland, backwoods* and *forsaken* as synonyms for rural. For urban, the thesaurus listed *civic, civil and cultured.* Over time, such negative connotations have a way of becoming the norm.

Trends Affecting Rural Schools

Just as image represents one of the obstacles facing rural educators, there exist dynamic educational, demographic, and economic trends that impact every aspect of the rural community.

Demographic Trends

Clearly, the standard definitions of rural areas and people paint a bleak picture. Do these images accurately portray conditions in rural areas? Three population trends reflect much of what is happening in rural America. First, the proportion of the population that is rural is decreasing. Second, in comparison with metropolitan areas, there is a relative decrease in the proportion of the working-aged population. Finally, the older segment of the population has increased. The figures in Table 1 illustrate these demographic trends.

Insert Table 1 about here

The rural population is becoming smaller and changing age. A larger percentage of the population lives in metropolitan areas than ever before. When the figures for the past 30 years are projected, this trend is expected to continue. Accompanying the relative decrease in the rural population, the proportion of the different age groups has changed. The working-aged segment of the rural population (ages 18 to 64) has increased. Metropolitan areas exhibit a similar pattern, but upon careful inspection some differences appear. Rather than a uniform set of differences between the rural/metropolitan percentages across the decades, discrepancies in the proportions decreased from 1960 to 1970, but have been increasing since that time. For the older group, the trend is reversed; a relatively greater increase in the proportion of the older portion of the population in rural areas has occurred when compared with that of metropolitan areas. Obviously, the operative population dynamics for rural and metropolitan areas are quite different.

Cromartie (1993) sheds light on these differences by noting that rural to metropolitan emigration is a major source of population gains and losses. Further, the rural to metropolitan migration is primarily due to working-aged adults moving for better employment opportunities. Rural areas attractive to retirement aged individuals are the recipients of a metropolitan to rural migration (Hobbs, 1994). Thus there are two contrasting shifts in the rural population. One is economically driven and represents the movement of working-aged adults to metropolitan areas to improve employment opportunities. Older adults are moving to rural areas to improve their quality-of-life. Thus the challenge facing education in rural areas will be partly defined by contrasting population shifts. The

different age groups are likely to have different views on the relative importance of education.

Economic Trends

The importance of economic considerations in defining the challenges for rural education extends beyond population shifts. Several of these economic factors are presented in Table 1. The median family income in rural areas is about three-fourths that of metropolitan areas. The fact that participation in the labor force was approximately 6% less for rural areas than metropolitan ones in both 1980 and 1990 (Parker, 1993b), does not completely explain the income differentials. As indicated in Table 1, metropolitan areas have a proportionately greater share of professional and upper-level managerial positions. These jobs pay more than others, and given their concentration in metropolitan areas, income differentials between rural and metropolitan areas are made worse. In contrast, rural areas have a higher proportion of the working poor who are stuck in low-wage, low-benefit jobs.

The incidence of poverty provides another perspective on the impact of the economy on the challenges to rural education. In comparison with metropolitan areas, rural poverty is more prevalent in both the general and the school-aged segments of the population. The data in Table 1 indicate that there has not been a steady decrease in rural poverty rates over the past 30 years, nor has there been an increase. Rather, two mini-trends are evident. First, the incidence of poverty and the difference in the corresponding rates for rural and metropolitan areas **decreased** in the period 1960 to 1980. Second, overall poverty and the rural/ metropolitan discrepancy **increased** from 1980 to 1990. Of special significance to education is the fact that the percentage of school-aged

children in poverty remains essentially the same as it was 20 years ago. The reduction in the poverty rate for the total population has not extended to the school-aged population. Hobbs (1994) documents the increase in poverty for this population and Lahr (1993) reinforces the point by noting that over one third of the rural Americans who are in poverty are children.

What image emerges from these different economic vantage points? In the future rural education will occur within communities with higher unemployment, lower median family income and higher rates of poverty than metropolitan areas. This means that more rural students will come from economically impoverished backgrounds and fewer will come from homes in which the parents have professional or managerial positions.

Educational Trends

Two related educational factors, high school and college completion rates, are notable in defining the challenges for rural education. The figures in Table 1 indicate that the average person attends school longer than in the past. This tendency for more schooling is equally evident in both rural and urban populations, but that is where the similarity ends. From 1960 through 1980, high school completion was approximately 10% lower for the rural population than the metropolitan population. From 1980 to 1990, the difference dropped to 7.8%. This suggests that the gap in the level of basic education (i.e., completion of high school) between the rural and metropolitan populations has been reduced. However, the gap in college completion rates between the two populations has been increasing each decade. In 1960, only 3.4% more of the metropolitan population compared with the rural population had completed college. By 1990, this discrepancy was 9.5%. A portion of the difference can be explained by the outmigration of the more highly educated to obtain jobs

in metropolitan areas (McGranahan, 1994; Parker, 1993a). This pattern represents the combination of two trends, the migration of working-aged individuals from rural to metropolitan areas and the greater incidence of a managerial/professional work force in metropolitan areas.

A third factor, school consolidation, a means of both cutting costs and improving quality, has been the single most frequently implemented educational trend in the 20th century (Stephens, 1988 in Stern, p. 43). Haller (1992), noted that consolidation has resulted in a marked decrease in the number of rural schools and school districts, yet more than 45% of school districts in the US are rural. Only 4.8 million students attend those numerous rural schools compared to more than 36.5 million students in urban districts (Stern, 1994).

Although consolidation has resulted in bigger districts and bigger schools, rural schools are still smaller and poorer than nonrural schools (Stern, 1994). Historically, student population has determined funding allocations, and smaller numbers mean fewer dollars. Fewer dollars mean fewer teachers and fewer advanced or specialized courses, thus putting students in rural schools at a disadvantage, not unlike Kozol's (1991) description of urban inequalities.

A recent study of educational inequity in North Carolina schools illustrates a form of geographical predestination. In the following example, Blue Ridge School is a consolidated school that has 390 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade, with about 120 students in grades 9 through 12; Northern High School has 1,640 students in grades 9 through 12.

> ...students at Blue Ridge High School in rural Jackson County... have 116 fewer courses to choose from than students at

> Northern High School in Durham County. Poorer schools are unable to provide students with a range of courses, especially in critical areas such as math and science. In 26 poor school districts, not one student sat for an AP exam... (p. 26, NCACLU).

Such curriculum differences between very large and very small schools are commonplace (Smithmier, 1994). School consolidation, a vehicle for economic efficiency and academic efficiency, does not seem to have met the promise to erase inequities because numbers just do not do justice to the stories of those schools. Other than the fact that they are in the same state, Blue Ridge School and Northern High School might as well be on different planets for all they have in common.

Students from poor, rural schools experience disadvantages in college attendance and graduation. *The Rural Initiative,* a study of educational opportunity in North Carolina (Public School Forum, 1990) compared the five wealthiest counties with the five poorest counties in North Carolina and revealed a 120 point SAT score deficit for the poor counties. In another report, *A Right Denied*, the North Carolina American Civil Liberties Union found that "over 25 percent of the students attending the University of North Carolina (UNC) system campuses from 37 separate, predominantly poor counties required remediation upon their arrival at college" (NCACLU,1991). The poor counties in both studies were predominantly rural.

The conclusions that can be drawn from an analysis of the demographic, economic and educational trends displayed in Table 1 are that in rural areas in general, working populations are shrinking, economies are declining and students are not competing well in college attendance and completion. Although there are mixed findings about the

successes of rural students beyond high school (Smithmier, 1994), and some states fare better than North Carolina, for more than 85% of rural students nationwide, the goal of a college education culminating in a professional career remains out of reach (See Table 1). In the past when rural economies were self-sufficient, perhaps educational opportunity did not matter as much. Today that is not the case. Additional resources could alieviate many shortages and buttress the system against problems that cannot be directly addressed such as the outmigration of many well-educated, working-aged adults. Money alone, however, will not turn the statistics around and reduce the gaps between rural and metropolitan areas. If rural communities are to survive, they must develop new economies, attract working-aged people, and redesign schools so the students are not at a disadvantage just because of the geographical characteristics of their homes.

Strengths of Rural Communities

The Perspectives of Rural College Students

The Rural Attitude Survey

The identified problems are formidable, but recognizing them is the easy part. Where do we begin in developing solutions? What strengths does rural America possess upon which to create a foundation for addressing these problems? As a beginning point in this endeavor, we developed a questionnaire to investigate our students' experiences with rural life. We gave the survey to 108 students from 5 different courses in educational foundations and psychology at Western Carolina University; a majority were in the teacher education curriculum at the sophomore or junior level. The University is in Cullowhee, NC. It has about 6000 students and is in the southern part of western North Carolina, sixty miles

from Asheville and 150 miles from Atlanta. Cullowhee is in the Southern Appalachian Mountains about 20 miles southeast of the Cherokee entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Raleigh, over 300 miles to the east, is the state capital and technological center and a place many natives will never visit. No matter where the students' were from originally, attending Western Carolina University gave them a rural experience. To illustrate the rural context in which the survey took place, we asked the students to, "Describe WCU and its surroundings as if you are telling an old friend about it." The majority of students described it in rather glowing terms, but a student from Raleigh illustrated an urban perspective with his response, "They call it Cullowhat because you don't know where in the world you are, stuck here in these mountains. All of the people here are from the hills, and they intend to stay in these hills." Some 60% of the students attending the University are first generation college students.

The questionnaire contained open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections of personal experiences. The students' insights provided a view that was in sharp contrast to the picture of rural areas projected by the images and trends described earlier. We asked our students, *What do you think of when you hear the word rural?* Contrary to typical definitions, not one student used the term *nonmetropolitan* in his or her answers; nor did they use negative terms or urban contexts. In fact, they used images that, taken together, told good stories about country life. One student, for example, responded that when he thinks of rural, he thinks of...

> ...common people, good people, love of land, beautiful scenery, men without shirts, kids without shoes, women without

makeup, many people without a care in the world, small churches, not much traffic on dusty, back roads.

The great majority of the responses to this question conveyed images evocative of a healthy society. The students indicated that when they thought of rural, they thought of people, nature and community. When they mentioned people in their comments, they emphasized the importance of relationships and relatedness. They described the importance of a sense of community with phrases such as: *small; involvement; peaceful community; people actively involved in community activities; a community that couldn't survive very long without help from other places.* Their references to places of business included community contexts; they described communities that had *small businesses; one gas station; one post office; convenience stores; no factories or shopping areas; small stores where the owners know each of the customers and each person feels welcome.*

The students gave characteristics that evoked a sense of relationship with comments such as: *close-knit people; family gatherings; good country folks talking; old people sitting on the porch in a swing; and people who care about each other instead of the amount of money they make.* They intertwined their references to nature within their descriptions of people and communities. Three examples from students' responses illustrate the interrelationship among people, community and nature: They indicated that when they think of rural, they think of: '...close knit people and lots of farm land spread out' and '...the country. I can see horses, mountains, waterfalls, and I can hear good country folks talking. It makes me think of Highlands, my hometown.' Another student wrote, "Rural is country; farms and children in the fields

playing baseball or cow pasture football. I can visualize gardens, tomatoes and tobacco fields, and cattle grazing in the pastures."

The next question on the survey was, *What feelings does the word 'rural' bring out in you?* Their responses to this question were, like their answers to the previous question, overwhelmingly positive and idealistic. Most students described feelings that could be categorized as people/relationship, aesthetic and unmaterialistic, safety and peace, home, the past, community, and positive emotions. One woman's response illustrated some common themes:

> The feelings I get when I hear the word rural are security and a sense of togetherness because a lot of rural communities are tightly knit. Contentment is another feeling I get when I think of rural. People living in the rural community seem to have a sense of fulfillment, being happy with what they have.

Another woman's response is also illustrative of the general reactions among students. She responded,

> I love the word rural. This, to me, is the best place to bring up children and to live a happy, relaxed life. Nice people and friendly atmosphere -- relatively crime-free. Maybe even some backwoods type of people. Rural brings out happiness in my mind.

We extracted and categorized all of the responses students gave to this question. Their responses included 88 different positive words, several of which they used frequently. Their most frequently used words were peaceful, safe, and warmth. Closeness, comfortable, friendly, home, quiet, and relaxing were also used frequently. Only 14 of the students had

negative responses. The comparable list of words they used to describe their feelings had a total of 17 different words including negative, no culture, none, nothing and isolated.

High School Experiences Of Rural Students

Schools reflect their time and place, and our students described their high schools, like their communities, as having positive qualities. We asked them to, *Describe your high school as if you are telling a new friend at WCU about it.* To analyze their responses to this question, we separated those who were originally from rural areas from those who were from urban or suburban areas. A few examples of the responses from the rural students illustrate school-community themes: "My school is a school everybody is proud of," "My high school was very small, and I knew almost everyone by name. It is a close-knit family," "It was very comfortable in the school because the teachers and students were like family" and "The teacher knew his/her students and all the students knew each other. I knew the name of every student that I graduated with." Athletics and sports were mentioned as positive aspects of the high schools.

While our rural students described their homes in glowing terms, their feelings about their high schools were also critical. Their criticisms reflect the negative stereotypes of rural areas and are related to demographic and economic issues we presented. They described poor school facilities. For example, one student said, "I went to this high school that was so old we were lucky to walk out alive." Students reported negative experiences regarding their socioeconomic status. Two students wrote similar comments: "It was hard to get into college prep classes if you were poor because there was only one counselor, and she

figured if you were poor, you were automatically a loser." Several students described their high schools as 'hick schools" as illustrated by this response: "...My high school was fairly small; it was considered to be one of the hick schools." Another student said that her high school was "...a kind of run-down rural school compared to the city school in the area. Our SAT scores are not as high as the city school."

The Brain Drain

We asked our students, "Do you plan to go back to your community to work after college? If so, what kind of job do you hope to get?" Almost half (43%) plan to go back home, and about 15% are ambivalent. Of those who want to go back home, 85% plan to work in an educational career, most as teachers. Our students' responses are consistent with the portrayal of rural areas as losing a large portion of their educated young adults because of the lack of professional and managerial jobs.

Our students' optimism about their homes, relations and communities comes from their personal experiences. They may sound unduly optimistic in the violent and materialistic world of the waning twentieth century. But their voices should be heard. They are saying that there is true value in relationships, that community is an anchor, that peace and safety lie within their rural communities. They are also telling us that their schools had good qualities but could have been better; their schools could have provided more opportunities for the disadvantaged students and better preparation for college and the work place.

Home, Family, Community, Caring

As we noted earlier, rural education did not get much attention in the national reform movement that began in the 1980s. Among other areas of neglect, the reform movement missed the importance of the home,

family and community in reshaping school (Bell, 1993). Clinchy (1993) argued for more emphasis on the home and family, and smaller schools and smaller classes; he said, all schools should be "small, safe, intimate, family-like institutions" (p. 610). Theobold and Mills (1995) hold that schools have to rediscover community and caring. Stern's (1994) discussion of rural school-community relationships supports the images generated by our students regarding the sense of community and smallness of scale that represent the best qualities of rural life. For the students in our survey, the positive feelings they had about living in rural areas were connected with their families, homes and small communities and with peace, safety and caring. Many of them have chosen a career in education so that they will be able to return to their homes after college. For rural schools to be successful in combating their problems, they will have to capitalize on the community and family ties that our rural students rated as so important. It is curious that rural communities, who for so long have been marginalized against the dominant culture, have precisely the qualities for which the critics of American schools are now looking. As educators, we need to recognize these strengths, take advantage of them and build the preparations of rural educators around them. We have neglected our ruralness too long.

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Table 1

Selected Demographic, Economic, and
Educational Factors; 1960 - 90
Classified by Rural/metropolitan Residence

Factor	Year							
	1960		1970		1980		1990	
	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro
Demographic Factors								
Percentage of the population classified as living nonmetro/metro areas	30.1	69.9	26.4	73.6	23.8	76.2	22.5	77.5
Percentage of the population aged 18-64	52.2	56.3	53.3	56.4	57.5	61.5	58.6	62.8
Percentage of the population aged 65 or older	10.1	8.6	11.7	9.3	13.0	10.7	14.7	11.9
Education Factors								
Percentage of the population which completed high school or more	34.0	43.3	44.3	54.8	58.7	69.0	69.2	77.0
Percentage of the population which completed college or more	5.1	8.5	7.0	11.8	11.0	17.9	13.0	22.5

Table 1--continued

Selected Demographic, Economic, and
Educational Factors; 1960 - 90
Classified by Rural/metropolitan Residence

Factor	Year							
	1960		1970		1980		1990	
	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro
Economic Factors								
Median family income	4278	6211	7458	9962	16451	21104	27620	37933
Percentage of the population classified as living in poverty	34.2	17.0	20.9	11.5	15.7	11.4	16.8	12.0
Percentage of children under 18 classified as living in poverty	37.0	17.3	22.4	12.8	18.9	15.0	21.9	17.1
Percentage of the employed classified as working in professional/managerial positions	14.3	21.4			19.9	27.4	22.6	32.0

Note. The information in the table was derived from data in Rural Conditions and Trends, Vol. 4, No. 3, Fall, 1993; Social and Economic Characteristics of the Population in Metro and Nonmetro Counties, 1970 by Fred K. Hines, David L. Brown, and John M. Zimmer; Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1972; and Rural People in the American Economy, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1966.